ABSTRACT

Thematization in Advanced Jordanian English

Most advanced EFL Jordanian students, when learning the grammar of English spend time assimilating the structure of sentences in terms of their constituent parts. They learn which strings of words are, and which are not, constituents. Also, they learn how constituents differ from each other, how they combine with each other, where subjects, objects and adverbials are placed in relation to the verb, and what order they can occur and so forth. Yet structural options available for rearranging most typical sequences are often ignored or underplayed in language teaching or learning. They are often dismissed either on grounds of ‘bad style’ or probably because of continued dominance of traditional standards taken from the written code. The notion of theme and how it is realized in English is an area where grammatical structure and spoken discourse seem most closely allied. Variation in clause structure is a fundamental part of the way we express our thoughts and it enables us to understand those of others.

It is hypothesized that languages vary in how thematisation is typically realized. English is often called an SVO language, in contrast with Arabic which is often called a VSO, in that the declarative clause requires a verb to start with, a subject at the centre and an object after it. In both languages this pattern is often recast: the basic clause constituents may be rearranged so that some elements of clause structure which typically occur in medial or final position in the structure of the clause are positioned initially.

The element that occurs in the initial position is the theme, and the different ways used to make some element initial are called thematization devices.

Most advanced learners, when learning the grammar of English, spend time assimilating the ‘flat structure’ of clauses in English, where subjects, objects and adverbials are placed in relation to the verb. The sentences chosen for analysis are the ‘most neutral’ or ‘thematically unmarked’. Variation of word order and its concomitant effect on how the information is presented is not very well-known to the advanced Arab learner of English. Less well-known is the relevance of tonic variation to the development of communication.

This study hypothesizes that thematization devices are sources of great difficulty to the advanced Arab learner. Fronting-devices, i.e. the ways of bringing different elements to the front position, or the placement of the tonic syllable, i.e. the syllable singled out for attention because of its
importance as bearing new information escape the attention of advanced Arab learners. There is a tendency for an Arab learner to focus attention on each word or phrase. A word that is ‘singled out for attention’ as being important is often missed.

The objectives of this study are the following:

(i) to measure students’ ability to recognize English thematizing patterns
(ii) to highlight the importance of grammatical structures that are underplayed in grammar textbooks
(iii) determine the effect of L1 thematization processes on corresponding L2 processes
(iv) pinpoint sources of difficulty attributed to different focusing processes in conversational exchange

To testify the hypothesis and to verify initial observation which entails difficulties for the English-speaking listener in interpreting the Arab participant’s speech, as a result of the latter’s inability to reorganize what he wants to say within an appropriate framework in which certain elements are focused on highlighted, 30 sentences which represent types of variation in word order have been recorded by an English RP speaker at the Language Centre – the University of Jordan. Key orientational features, e.g. time or place markers, objects, compliments are front placed. Some items have been singled out for attention or ‘made to stand out’ because it is important in creating a theme in the sentence recording.

A test comprising 30 sentences in which certain elements were thematized and recorded by an English RP speaker were presented to 120 advanced L2 students. They were asked to circle the words or words that the speaker chose to highlight or focus attention on. Each sentence was repeated twice to ensure students’ appropriate reception.